

# **Study on Volunteer Fire Corps (*Shōbōdan*) and Its Role in the Process of Community Building for Disaster Prevention**

- The Case of Sendai City -

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## **Introduction**

### **Chapter 1 Development Process of Sendai City Volunteer Fire Corps**

1. History of Volunteer Fire Corps

History of Sendai City Volunteer Fire Corps can be traced back April 1889 (Meiji 22) , with the establishment of Sendai City Fire Fighting Team (*Sendai Shōbōgumi*), which afterward showed considerable development, and on May 1922 (Taisho 11) Self Defense Corps was organized to support the Sendai City Fire Fighting Team. As Japanese government shifted towards war administration, in 1936 (Showa 11) the former Fire Fighting Team merged with Sendai Air-Raid Defense Corps (*Sendai Bōgodan*), which was at the time a private organization for anti air-raid. On January 1939 (Showa 14), it was further reorganized into Sendai Air-Defense and Fire-Fighting Unit (*Sendai*

*Keibodan*). During the war, the Air Defense and Fire Fighting Unit controlled as well as supported the life of the citizens.

After the Second World War, with the enactment of the Ordinance of Volunteer Fire Corps in January 1948 (Showa 23), the Air-Defense and Fire-Fighting Unit was disbanded, and the the Volunteer Fire Corps (*Shōbōdan*) took its place. The Volunteer Fire Corps started as 2 corps with 23 sub-corps, and was then expanded into 3 corps with 33 sub-corps → 4 corps with 41 sub-corps → 6 corps with 57 sub-corps → to present form of 7 corps with 57 sub-corps. However, since 1965 (Showa 40s), some Volunteer Fire Corps had to cut down the limit number of personnel for the corps, due to the lack of number of people to become the member of the corps. Even though originally membership of Volunteer Fire Corps was for men only, on May 1997 women began to be accepted as member of Volunteer Fire Corps.

The history of Sendai City Volunteer Fire Corps mentioned above, is parallel to the reshuffling process of the Fire Department itself. Along with the growth of the city, the Sendai Fire Department also underwent enlargement and modernization. This also defined the form of the city's Volunteer Fire Corps. Even though the Fire Department and Volunteer Fire Corps are two separate institutions, in its actual conditions, the Volunteer Fire Corps is being put inside the administrative system of the government.

## 2. Urbanization and the Changing of Volunteer Fire Corps

After the implementation of Municipal Fire Service (*Jichitai Shōbō*), it has been difficult to maintain the limit number of member in Volunteer Fire Corps, due to urbanization of Sendai City. With the development of Sendai, the local community is also undergoing some considerable changes. One of the result for this is the decline of the number of membership in Volunteer Fire Corps. Furthermore, this decline led to 'top-down' reorganization of the corps with the Wide-area Fire Administration. This is a parallel move with the reorganization of the Fire Department. However, as the Volunteer Fire Corps is being reorganized, its role is being shifted into rear service or the home front of the Fire Department. Accordingly, the long history of fire-fighting culture of the corps is disappearing. The important task for the moment is to revive the fire fighting culture which can accelerate the development of citizens' autonomy, in relation with reorganization of local community.

## Chapter 2 Structure and Function of Volunteer Fire Corps

### 1. Organization of Fire Department and Volunteer Fire Corps

The Volunteer Fire Corps underwent changes in its function and role inside the structure of the Fire Department, along with the completion and modernization of the Fire Department itself. The relations between the Fire Department and the Volunteer Fire Corps, as well as the trend of the relations

in the future, will be observed in this part.

The first to be observed is the position of the Fire Department and the Volunteer Fire Corps in the fire/disaster prevention and fire fighting administration. The organization of fire/disaster prevention and fire fighting system in Japan can be broadly divided into state level, prefectural level, and municipal level. However, the management of fire prevention and fire fighting is entrusted in the hand of the municipalities. Thus the fire prevention and fire fighting system of municipalities is in itself an independent system. The relations between the Fire Department and the Volunteer Fire Corps can be seen in the municipalities level. Even though basically the Volunteer Fire Corps is an independent institution from the Fire Department, it is positioned under the governmental administration.

The next to be observed is the ideal condition of the fire/disaster prevention and fire fighting system. The focus is on what kind of ideal condition of the governmental administration from the point of view of the Volunteer Fire Corps, and what kind of ideal condition of the Volunteer Fire Corps from the point of view of the government. The Volunteer Fire Corps shows its expectation of financial support from the government. While the government expects the independent role of the Volunteer Fire Corps, as it has some characteristics which are different from those of the Fire Department, such as, its ability in mobilizing a large number of people and its close adherence to local community. This tendency is in the rising since Hanshin-Awaji Great Earthquake in 1995.

As can be seen in the above paragraphs, from a legal point of view, the Volunteer Fire Corps is an independent institution from the Fire Department system. However, in reality, both institutions are inseparable from each other. In one hand, the relationship can be seen as a cooperative one, while on the other hand it is a mutual dependency. The Volunteer Fire Corps is often packed as one of community administration. The reason for why there is a mutual dependency between the Volunteer Fire Corps and the government administration is further observed, using analysis from Ueda Tadaichi.

## 2. Present Condition of Organization of Volunteer Fire Corps

In the case of Sendai City, the Volunteer Fire Corps organization consists of 7 corps, according to 7 wards in Sendai, which are Aoba-ward, Miyagino-ward, Wakabayashi-ward, Taihaku-ward, Izumi-ward, Miyagi-ward, and Akiu-ward. Each has its own main office. Furthermore, sub-corps are set-up under each corps which reaches the total number of 57 sub-corps in Sendai city. Each main office has three divisions, which are division of general affairs, division of fire/disaster prevention, and division of inspection. While each sub-corps has five units, which are general affairs unit, fire/disaster prevention unit, fire fighting unit, flood protection unit, and citizens relief unit. Member of Fire



Volunteer Corps can be classified in full-time officer (member) and part-time officer (member). Whereas in the case of Sendai city, all members are part-time members. There are seven rank of memberships, leader of corps (*Dan-chō*), vice-leader of corps (*Fukudan-chō*), leader of sub-corps (*Bundan-chō*), vice-leader of sub-corps (*Fuku Bundan-chō*), unit leader (*Bu-chō*), group leader (*Han-cho*), and member (*Dan-in*).

At present, the Volunteer Fire Corps of Sendai city is facing the problem of declining number of member and shortage of successors for the corps. To eliminate these problems, the treatment towards member is to be improved, while the schedule for activities is to be changed from weekdays to weekends. In regard of the shortage of successors for the corps, this problem has been growing as a serious problem, since the average age of member of the corps is elevating and the number of younger people to become member of the corps is declining. For the solution of the problem, apart from two objective efforts mentioned above, the Volunteer Fire Corps needs to improve its 'old-fashioned, and isolated' image, and try to form image which appeals to younger generation.

### 3. Present Condition of Activities of Volunteer Fire Corps

In this part, through observing the present condition of activities of the Volunteer Fire Corps in Sendai City, various problems of the activities themselves are to be identified.

The activities of the Volunteer Fire Corps in everyday life includes distributing information on fire prevention to the citizens, extra precaution during the *dontosai* festival, fire fighting and citizens rescuing during fire disaster. In the case of Sendai City, the activities of Volunteer Fire Corps at normal times are defined in municipal ordinances and regulations. However, activities during emergency times are not concretely defined. As the result, in case of emergency, 'according to the custom' the Volunteer Fire Corps acts secondarily to the activities of the Fire Department. During the Hanshin-Awaji Great Earthquake, the Volunteer Fire Corps proved its effectiveness in times of emergency. Learning from this experience, for the improvement of the activities of the Volunteer Fire Corps, it is also necessary to legally define in details the activities of the corps during emergency times, in its relation to the line of instruction and command among the fire fighting institutions during emergency times.

The actual state of activities of the Sendai City Volunteer Fire Corps, are divided into three activities which are "during emergency", "precaution", "training". It can be preliminarily concluded that, the activities "during emergency" require broad knowledge and skill, and in relation to this, the "precaution" and "training" activities during normal times are of great importance. After observing each of the seven Volunteer Fire Corps in Sendai

City, there seems to be many similarities of activities, while each corps also develops activities which are based on the characteristics of each region.

#### 4. Volunteer Fire Corps from the point of view of the Citizens and Consciousness of the Members of Volunteer Fire Corps

The consciousness and opinions of the citizens and the member of Volunteer Fire Corps on the Sendai City Volunteer Fire Corps are to be observed in this part. The observation is based on the result of research using questionnaire. Even though the Volunteer Fire Corps is positioned inside the structure of the Fire Department, it also serves as institution for local autonomy of the community. This is related to the fact that the Volunteer Fire Corps is closely bound to local community. Good evidences for this are, firstly, the recognition of the people towards the corps which is formed not through mass media but through the activities of the corps itself, and secondly, the new membership for the corps depends largely on personal relationships in the local community.

The research shows that Volunteer Fire Corps has a positive image in the eyes of the citizens. According to the citizens, the city needs the Volunteer Fire Corps. And the citizens have a familiar sentiment towards the traditional event of *dezomeshiki* or the initial activities of the fire fighting institutions at the beginning of every new year.

On the other hand, while most of the member of Volunteer Fire Corps point out that contribution to their local community is their motivation of becoming member, they also find that balancing the activities for the corps and their formal job turns to be a difficult task. It is also clear that as the modern life style brings diversity in many parts, it is becoming difficult to balance private life and life as member of Volunteer Fire Corps.

In the fast-changing society, the foundation for the existence of Volunteer Fire Corps is being questioned. It is now facing not only the problem of shortage of successor, but also the problem on how to manage fire and disaster prevention in the community, related to various voluntary groups and enterprises. What kind of relation to be built by the static Volunteer Fire Corps, with the independent fire prevention organizations, which are becoming better equipped these days. It is important to have a vision for the future on local community and the Volunteer Fire Corps.

Although it is difficult to predict how the Volunteer Fire Corps will change in the future, the institution itself will certainly maintain its existence as it is now, or turn into a new form of institution.

### **Chapter 3 Local Disaster Prevention System and Volunteer Fire Corps**

#### **1. Sendai City Disaster Prevention System**

In 1995, Japan experienced a severe earthquake in Hanshin-Awaji area

in the south west of Japan. The earthquake proved that cities with dense population, need to be well equipped, in order to face the possibility of natural disaster. Before the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake, Sendai also has experienced a great earthquake in 1978 (Showa 53), known as the Miyagi prefecture off-shore earthquake. Learning from this experience, in June 1979 (Showa 54) Sendai City declared its aim to be a 'Disaster Resistive City' (*Bōsai Toshi*) and set the date of June 12 as the day for 'Disaster Prevention by the Citizens' (*Shimin Bōsai no Hi*). The city's concern for safety can be found also in the 'Sendai City Comprehensive Plan 2000' (*Sendai shi Sōgō Keikaku 2000*), which was released in March 1990 (Heisei 2).

## 2. Position of Volunteer Fire Corps in Local Disaster Prevention System

The position of Volunteer Fire Corps in local disaster prevention system of the Sendai city is mentioned both in the "Sendai City Comprehensive Plan 2000" and the "Sendai City Basic Plan for Disaster Resistive City". In the "Sendai City Comprehensive Plan 2000", the Volunteer Fire Corps is given the position as a part of the measure of completion and strengthening of the organization of fire and disaster prevention. The reorganization and revitalization of the Volunteer Fire Corps as well as the improvement its equipments is also to be conducted. On the other hand, in the "Sendai City Basic Plan for Disaster Resistive City" (*Sendai shi Bōsai Toshi Zukuri Kihon Keikaku*), the Volunteer Fire Corps is given the role as one of fire fighting organizations at initial stage.

## 3. Community Building for Disaster Prevention and Volunteer Fire Corps

The positioning of the Volunteer Fire Corps in local disaster prevention system, leads furthermore to the relations between disaster resistive community and the Volunteer Fire Corps. Regarding the function of the Volunteer Fire Corps inside the local disaster prevention system, also brings further question of how to build a community that will foster and support the activities of Volunteer Fire Corps, and able to maintain active Corps. It proofs that to build or reactivate the Volunteer Fire Corps, the building of community is to be put into first priority. To build a community, the people involved in the community need to have a certain psychological attachment towards their community. Accordingly, the effort to build the such attachment is also needed.

# Chapter 4 Local Culture and Volunteer Fire Corps

## 1. Tradition of Fire-Fighting

The tradition of fire-fighting in Japan was supported by the long tradition of wood-housing. Houses and building using wood as main material show good resistance toward earthquake. However, this kind of construction is prone to fire. The tradition of wood-housing in Japan which can be traced back

as far as 4 century BC, has been fostering not only culture of the carpentry, but also culture of fire-fighting. Accordingly, the culture of carpenters and fire-fighting are two inseparable cultures.

The *Dezomeshiki* or the initial activities of the fire fighting institutions at the beginning of every new year shows various form of fire-fighting traditions, such as *Hashigo nori* or stairs climbing, *Matoi* or banners, as well as *Kiyari* or traditional song of carpenters. These are forms of tradition of fire-fighting that can still be seen today.

## 2. Volunteer Fire Corps and the Citizens

Citizens have many expectations towards the Volunteer Fire Corps to function as the core of community disaster prevention system. However, before adding new activities in the Volunteer Fire Corps such as rescuing senior citizens and the disables, to the basic activities of the Corps include fire-flood disaster prevention, first of all the Corps needs to be reactivated. One of the key point in the effort is to build an attractive image of the Volunteer Fire Corps which also includes admitting women as member, so that the problem of shortage of successor can be solved. This expectation from the citizens can be seen in the findings from survey on the Volunteer Fire Corps in Sendai City.

## Conclusion